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The CIA Again

The United States has been understandably embarrassed by the disclosure that the CIA has been secretly aiding the South Viet-Nam Special Forces that conducted the raids on Buddhist pagodas. Yet this is, unfortunately, not the first time the Government has been made to look foolish by the misnamed Central Intelligence Agency. And the trouble is precisely that the CIA does not confine itself to gathering intelligence but has been given operational responsibility for tasks for which it has debatable competence.

One might have supposed that the Bay of Pigs debacle would have alerted the White House to the risks of allowing an intelligence agency to sit in judgment on its own operational missions. The temptation is strong to tailor intelligence to support preconceived opinion. Moreover, when the CIA invests its prestige in supporting a given course, there is an all-too-human tendency to seek vindication for a commitment of money and judgment.

This seems to lie behind the present muddle over CIA misadventures in Saigon. The agency's mission chief in that country had established close and cordial relations with Ngo Dinh Nhu, President Diem's brother and sponsor of the Special Forces. Some \$3 million a year was earmarked for helping the Special Forces. But reportedly the CIA had no advance warning that the Forces would invade the pagodas and the initial intelligence reaction was confused—contributing to the confusion in Washington over what transpired that fateful day.

Nevertheless, the payments evidently continued in the face of Government policy to the contrary, and the Administration has been reduced to a stutter in trying to explain what has happened. Ironically, notwithstanding the CIA subsidy, the pro-Diem press in Saigon has been bitterly attacking the American agency for allegedly taking part in an attempted coup against the regime.

Let it be said that the CIA contains men of undoubted skill and patriotism. Let it also be said that much of the American problem in Saigon springs out of circumstances that not even the wisest of men could easily meet. But some self-inflicted wounds form part of the heartbreaking calamity. In the past, there has been a distressing tendency to subordinate political to military considerations and to avert the eyes from unpleasant realities. The CIA, while not alone in this failing, was unable to provide a detached intelligence corrective because its own agents were enmeshed in the operations of the regime.

There are many rueful lessons in the South Vietnamese tragedy, and not the least of them is that it makes sense in every respect to divorce intelligence from operations that belong in the military sphere. It would be heartening if the present embarrassment were turned to useful purpose by effecting a real reorganization of the CIA. The opportunity should have been grasped after the Cuban invasion; if nothing is done now, both the country and the agency may be needlessly humiliated again.